

## In Search of a Meaningful Story: Oral History and Triathlon Memory in Australia

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## **In Search of a Meaningful Story: Oral History and Triathlon Memory in Australia**

There have been relatively limited efforts to systematically record and document the origins and growth of triathlon as a sport. The Mission Bay Triathlon, held September 25, 1974, is widely regarded as the first modern triathlon. Staged by the San Diego Track Club the novel event combined swimming, cycling and running in continuous succession, although not in that order. Two decades later, the concept had attained sufficient global recognition and organization to achieve Olympic inclusion. Yet, while many magazine articles, oral and video interviews, and some small circulation films and documentaries present aspects of the sport's past, triathlon is not the subject of a coherent sport history. This apparent silence raises interesting questions about the value and meanings attributed to triathlon by those involved in the sport. The Multisport Dreaming project emerged in part out of a desire to answer those questions, at least as they relate to triathlon in Australia.

A number of theoretical positions offer tools for understanding an athletic activity that by some measure appears to have transformed rapidly from subcultural novelty to respectable sport. Theorists applying a Gramscian approach to the study of sporting subcultures, usually adhere to the view that power is 'held by one group alone'.<sup>1</sup> Post-subcultural theorists, at least those interested in alternative or lifestyle sports, propose a more fluid relationship between dominant and alternative forces.<sup>2</sup> Individual agency in the consumption and production of meaning, they suggest, complicates attempts at class reductionism.<sup>3</sup> To this end Belinda Wheaton and Becky Beal, advocate attention both to 'specialist subcultural media' and its role in creating and circulating 'the

symbols and meanings of subcultural capital', as well as the ways in which 'subculturalists shape and re-shape' those meanings in 'specific acts of consumption'. While the formal and commercial structures of triathlon might appear to lend themselves to scrutiny in terms of hegemonic processes, the absence of a coherent narrative for the sport suggests that post-subcultural attention to 'niche media' represents a more productive approach to the study of triathlon history.<sup>4</sup>

The value to triathlon history of an approach that centres on the production and reading of specialist media is supported by arguments posed by sport historians drawing on memory studies. Critiquing the notion that 'master narratives' can evoke adequately the past of a whole group of people, Douglas Booth advocates an appreciation of the extent to which language 'facilitate[s], or exclude[s] from consideration, certain ways of thinking about experiences'. He also accepts that a range of 'non-literary forms' may be studied as texts in a similar manner.<sup>5</sup> Pointing to the many sport histories produced beyond academe, Murray Phillips reasons that they 'all create a relationship between the past and the present: they install social memory'.<sup>6</sup> Eschewing the monolithic notion of 'collective memory', Gary Osmond makes a case for the study of seemingly insignificant 'acts of social memory' about sport, such as postage stamps.<sup>7</sup> In this light, non-literary acts of social memory produced and consumed by people involved in the sport of triathlon might be added to specialist subcultural media as useful guides to the production, circulation and negotiation of subcultural meaning and identity, as well as the interplay of individual and structural agency in the negotiation of meaning about the sport.

Applying the logic that analysis of non-literary acts of social memory promises to reveal more than simply who and what collective memory includes or excludes, but also why and how, this paper proposes that oral histories offer an instructive resource for those interested in triathlon history. Making a case for stronger engagement with oral history by sport historians, Fiona Skillen and Carol Osborne note that historians have both relied on ‘eye-witness accounts ... of significant events’ and dismissed ‘first-hand recollections’ passed in oral form from ‘person to person, generation to generation’.<sup>8</sup> The broad rejection of oral testimony hints at the ways in which subcultures dependent on oral mechanisms for disseminating information are silenced. In the process, this silencing limits understanding of the ways in which the meaning of a sport is produced and mediated. Drawing on research conducted in the process of examining the foundations of triathlon in Australia, this paper seeks to demonstrate the role played by oral traditions – as niche mechanisms for producing, circulating and negotiating meaning – in the framing of collective understandings of the sport’s past. Against a brief outline of triathlon history and its apparent limitations, this paper identifies oral traditions about the sport’s earliest years in Australia. It investigates the processes through which specific discourses constituted in the past through formal and informal acts of social memory, are negotiated in the oral histories of three white, male Australian triathletes – Michael Maroney, Stephen Foster and Chippy Slater. It proposes that vernacular traditions represent an influential component in what Gary Osmond refers to as ‘networked social memory’.<sup>9</sup>

### **Triathlon History(ies): key traditions in the presentation of the sport’s past**

Print records from around the beginning of the nineteenth century document events held in continental Europe that combined three athletic activities, but not swimming,

cycling and running. No continuous link appears to exist between them and the multisport experiment that took place at Mission Bay in 1974. Further events featuring swimming, cycling and running took place at a number of different sites in the United States over the next few years. In 1978 fifteen people attempted to complete an ultra-distance version of each leg, all in continuous succession, circumnavigating the Hawaiian Island of Oahu.<sup>10</sup> Co-founder John Collins remarked that anyone who completed such a challenge could justifiably be labelled an Iron Man.<sup>11</sup> Repeated every year thereafter and staged from 1981 on Hawaii's Big Island, the event attracted international attention as a result of a 1979 article in *Sports Illustrated* and Wide World of Sports television coverage.<sup>12</sup> The event became known as Ironman in triathlon vernacular, although a license agreement with Marvel Comics subsequently designated the word as an adjective.<sup>13</sup> Currently owned by Chinese multinational media conglomerate, Dalian Wanda, a large population of enthusiasts participate in an extensive series of Ironman® branded events around the world every year.<sup>14</sup>

Following the 1984 iteration of Ironman, enthusiasts met to discuss the foundation of an international governing body, and ultimately Olympic recognition. Five years later the International Triathlon Union (ITU) was established and staged the first ITU Triathlon World Championships featuring a 1.5 kilometre swim, 40 kilometre bike ride and 10 kilometre run at Avignon. By 1994, that specific combination of the three sports was approved by the International Olympic Committee as a component of the Sydney 2000 Summer Olympic Games program.<sup>15</sup> However, the position of the ITU and the subsidiary national governing bodies that together represent the Olympic arm of the sport remains complicated so long as the owners of the Ironman brand continue

to stage separate Ironman World Championships at Hawaii each year with qualifying events around the world.

These developments shaped the sport as it emerged and flourished in Australia. Mainstream media representations of Ironman inspired community groups such as Rotary Clubs and Surf Life Saving Clubs to stage imitation events in the early 1980s. A series of failed commercial and voluntary efforts to organize the sport led to the foundation of Triathlon Federation Australia (later re-named Triathlon Australia) in 1986. Magazines and race directors played a key role in the consolidation of a sense of national triathlon community, promoting different local events as part of their own version of a national triathlon series. Athletic professionalization occurred as talented athletes chased prize money and sponsorships. The same athletes ventured abroad from the late 1980s, and contributed through their dominance on courses less than half the distance of Ironman events, to the internationalization of the triathlon scene and the consolidation of the Olympic order. Bifurcation began at the start of the 1990s in Australia, with the licensing of an ultra-distance triathlon as Ironman Australia, its inclusion in a newly established international Ironman circuit, and athletic distance specialization. The Olympic arm dominated Australian triathlon in the 1990s due to continued athletic success on the ITU circuit, and the professional flair of Australian race directors. Following the Sydney Olympic Games, Australian athletes achieved greater success in the Ironman tradition, but diminished prominence in the Olympic arm of the sport, while distrust, mismanagement and uncertainty about the state of triathlon afflicted many parts of what might be labelled the Australian triathlon community.<sup>16</sup>

The above overview of triathlon's past is not readily available in a single master narrative. Histories in print or digital form and other acts of social memory are relatively scarce. Most early histories of triathlon came from individuals involved in the sport. In possibly the first book on triathlon, published 1982, Californian endurance athlete and businesswoman, Sally Edwards, begins with a personal history, an account of her first attempt at Ironman in 1981. Told in third person, Edwards historicizes her experience. Yet, the book is more about the future of the sport than the past. Explaining that triathlon has 'little history' and 'no founders', Edwards counters a popular perception of triathletes as 'crazies' and eccentrics, and attempts to normalize the sport by offering guidance for the uninitiated.<sup>17</sup> A similar message informs two other books from the period.<sup>18</sup> In addition, Bob Babbitt, who competed in Ironman in 1980, fell into triathlon journalism in the 1980s and developed a reputation for capturing human 'stories of perseverance and overcoming'.<sup>19</sup> Like Edwards, he aimed to encourage more people to embrace the sport, and said little about its subcultural roots.<sup>20</sup> Advocates for inclusion of the Californian subcultures out of which triathlon emerged, countered these visions: Mike Plant, a Vietnam veteran and editor of various running and triathlon periodicals, published a history of Ironman in 1987, entitled *Iron Will*.<sup>21</sup> Scott Tinley, 1982 Ironman champion, included the Southern Californian chapter of triathlon's past in a self-reflexively entitled book, *Triathlon: A Personal History*.<sup>22</sup> Networked triathlon memory in the 1980s thus appears to feature a dominant future-focused narrative and a fairly robust subcultural counter-narrative. Both narratives centre on a broad understanding of triathlon as part of everyday active lifestyles.

As the bifurcated structure of the sport took shape, triathlon memory narrowed and fragmented. Brief print and digital histories produced by the Olympic and Ironman arms of the sport refuse to acknowledge each other.<sup>23</sup> Very limited public archival holdings exist, and recent attention to triathlon history consists chiefly of the founding of Halls of Fame by triathlon magazines, the Ironman brand, the ITU and numerous NGOs over the past decade.<sup>24</sup> These attempts to formulate triathlon memory reveal a common theme – despite structural bifurcation, discourse around athletic performance on the world stage flourishes within both arms of the sport.<sup>25</sup> While narrative convergence might appear as a hegemonic strategy that displaces everyday experience in networked triathlon memory, this paper suggests that triathlon oral histories do not offer evidence of collective resistance to discourse that places emphasis on elite athletic performances.

Triathlon history in Australia appeared initially in race programs and newspaper reports. Like the how-to guides produced by Edwards and others, the sources compress their histories into small nuggets of text that are aimed at the uninitiated. Most attribute the origins of the sport to the iconic Hawaiian Ironman.<sup>26</sup> In part, *Multisport Dreaming: the foundations of triathlon in Australia* emerged out of a desire to address the apparent dearth of triathlon history. It involved interviews with roughly two hundred people, and access to their private collections. Accepting arguments proposing the impossibility of historical authority as well as the practical realities of assembling a history from dispersed records, the resultant monograph presents a montage of many small snippets of triathlon history.<sup>27</sup> The pieces do not fit readily into a coherent narrative. Instead they reveal inconsistencies and tensions between various segments within the sport. The resultant impression of triathlon's



past appears to resist the limited yet dominant narratives of the two arms of the sport. It evokes a sport with three arms, not two – Ironman, Olympic and Everyday triathlon. As the following discussion suggests, it does so because ephemeral and oral contributions to networked triathlon memory, on analysis, do not resist dominant discourse. They actively ‘shape and re-shape’ it.<sup>28</sup>

### **Oral Traditions and Networked Triathlon Memory**

While oral traditions told in the past might elude historical record, their traces may be discerned in the discourses referenced in the oral histories recorded for this project. Narratives about the earliest years of triathlon in Australia suggest that accounts in niche or mainstream media contributed to early knowledge about the sport.<sup>29</sup> Many Australian triathletes report learning about triathlon from early mainstream media coverage of Ironman, including the 1979 *Sports Illustrated* article, and Wide World of Sports footage of early Ironman races.<sup>30</sup> Future Triathlon Australia President Geoff Frost watched Ironman coverage in 1982 and ‘by the end of the program said that he wanted to do it’.<sup>31</sup> Paul Stone also saw the program and decided to organize a triathlon in Sydney.<sup>32</sup> Numerous early triathletes from the Sutherland Shire in Sydney indicate that the idea to stage a triathlon arose when members of the Elouera Surf Club saw the 1981 Ironman on television during a club barbeque.<sup>33</sup> Yet social memory regarding the sport’s origins did not arise from media reports alone. Local contexts shaped the timing and nature of responses to early mainstream and niche media discourse about triathlon. A shared conviction took hold among triathletes in Sydney’s south eastern suburbs that the Sutherland Shire Tri-Marathon represented the first triathlon in Australia.<sup>34</sup> It did not, but the Adelaide members of the international Sri Chinmoy movement, who staged the first proper triathlon in

Australia, did not promote their event to Sydney surf lifesavers.<sup>35</sup> The misunderstanding is reasonable, but it also demonstrates that anecdotal acts of social memory combined to constitute misleading discourse about the first triathlon in Australia, discourse that continues to shape triathlon memory in the present.

In addition, numerous oral histories indicate that people, not mainstream representations of triathlon, either catalysed awareness of triathlon or Ironman, or the desire to participate in one or the other or both.<sup>36</sup> Although Marc Dragan, a tennis coach from Sydney's northern beaches, first learned about Ironman through television coverage, it was a conversation with fellow Harbord Diggers Running Club members that prompted his decision to compete in a triathlon.<sup>37</sup> Greg Reddan, a Gold Coast based physical education teacher, surf lifesaver, surf ironman, marathon runner, pioneer aquathlon champion, winner of most triathlons held in Australia in 1981 and 1982, and the first Australian to finish the Hawaiian Ironman, learned about the 1981 Sutherland Shire Tri-Marathon from an aquathlon rival.<sup>38</sup> A friend approached Mark Cera while he was working at a gym in Melbourne, asking whether he had heard of Ironman and whether Cera could train him to compete in the event.<sup>39</sup> Tony Southwell watched Ironman at the surf club, but when he heard that fellow surf club member Ross Pyett had actually entered, Southwell wanted to do it as well, as did many others.<sup>40</sup> Eventually a group of around ten athletes and interested observers travelled with Pyett to Hawaii in 1984. These anecdotes affirm the importance of oral narratives in fostering early interest in triathlon, and provide evidence of discourse in early Australian triathlon memory that persists in the present – tales about Australia's triathlon pioneers.

As the above accounts suggest, oral narratives played a key role in the crafting and dissemination of triathlon narratives in Australia before regular newsletters and magazines were established in the mid-1980s. The frequent occurrence of oral acts of social memory in the past is apparent in an anecdote recounted by Ross Pyett. He was told a story about an Australian who, after he finished the 1983 Ironman, reportedly ‘turned around and went back to the last aid station to get chocolate chip cookies for his kids’. When Pyett travelled to Kailua-Kona to participate in Ironman the following year, he was ‘told that story all the time’.<sup>41</sup> Both Mark Batten, an aerobics instructor from Western Australia, and John Barker, a sports statistics fanatic from the Mornington Peninsula in Victoria explained separately that in the beginning, news about triathlon spread ‘by word of mouth’.<sup>42</sup> Triathlon histories that ignore these early acts of social memory, it seems, risk silencing the voices of everyday historians and the fundamental role they played in framing triathlon memory.

### **‘They’re in chunks’: the Search for Meaning in Triathlon Oral Histories**

While recognition of oral traditions as self-conscious acts that constitute social memory may rescue stories from the silences of history, oral narratives are also full of omissions. This paper concludes with an investigation of the possibility of subcultural agency in narrative creation to which Wheaton and Beal gesture, by considering the ways in which three white Australian men who tasted athletic success in the second half of the 1980s, produce, respond to, and circulate meaning in their oral testimonies.<sup>43</sup> Their oral histories provide evidence of particular vernacular traditions of considerable influence in the framing of triathlon memory, and in turn, some of the structures and inequalities that appear to characterize the sport.

The methodology adopted in the process of researching the foundations of triathlon in Australia, and in subsequent readings of oral histories gathered during the project, draws on authors interested in memory studies, life narrative studies, museum studies, and stage craft. One of the issues raised in memory studies relates not to what is remembered, but rather to what is intentionally or unintentionally forgotten. Gary Osmond points to both remembering and forgetting ‘as partners in the creation, expression and dissemination of social memory’.<sup>44</sup> In his taxonomy of forgetting, Paul Connerton suggests that ‘many small acts of forgetting’ occur in the construction of new identities. Over time, the many silences lead to ‘structural amnesia’.<sup>45</sup> In his study of a series of museum exhibitions about sport in Australia, Murray Phillips notes that the minimalist use of language and consistent application of literary techniques such as summaries and ellipses in museum displays, shape social memory through the process of forgetting.<sup>46</sup> The disappearance of traces of the past into the gulf of museum narrative ellipses might represent the ‘small acts of forgetting’, compounded into structural amnesia, to which Connerton refers.<sup>47</sup> It is possible to also treat oral histories as acts of social memory that involve forgetting.

Penny Summerfield and other oral history scholars suggest that it is ‘essential’ to examine narrative form and context in oral histories, as well as their content.<sup>48</sup> Using oral histories told by British women who joined Women’s Home Defense during the Second World War, Summerfield demonstrates that narrators draw on a range of public discourses to attach meaning to their experiences. A lack of narrative ‘composure’, evidenced by ‘misremembering’ and ‘difficulties of narration,’ occurs when the public discourses deployed in oral testimonies contain ‘cultural silences’ about narrator experiences.<sup>49</sup> As Summerfield explains:

Ordinary people who have memories that do not fit publicly available accounts have difficulty finding words and concepts with which to compose their memories, they ... seek to justify their deviation, or to press their memories into alternative frameworks, or express their stories only in fragmentary and deflected accounts.<sup>50</sup>

Other historians likewise pay attention to narrative form rather than content: for Mahua Sarkar, contradiction is telling, while Alessandro Portelli investigates ‘errors, myths, inventions, lies, dreams [and] visions’ for their meaning.<sup>51</sup> Portelli also notes the influence of context on oral testimonies: ‘The speaker may have told the story a thousand times before, but the interview context, [and] the interviewer’s challenge to the narrator to place her or his life in a historical context, generate subtle but radical changes’.<sup>52</sup> Some note that it is not just the narrative, but also ‘the sense of self [that] shifts’ according to context.<sup>53</sup> Among them, Katie Barclay and Sarah Richardson draw on Erving Goffman, who reasons that in face-to-face interactions, individuals express themselves through both language and behavior in accordance with assumed understandings about the nature of the interaction.<sup>54</sup> Goffman places emphasis on ‘disruptive events’ within the performance, such as contradiction, embarrassment, or confusion, suggesting that the ‘performed self’ is a ‘product of the scene’. To understand ‘performance disruptions’, he suggests, it is important to look at context.<sup>55</sup> Brought together it seems that oral histories need to be analysed at various levels, and attention paid to anomalies within oral histories, to evidence of ‘forgetting’, to a lack of ‘composure’, to contradiction and inconsistencies, and to flustered behaviour or a complete cessation of the narrative.

The following interrogation of three oral histories, which were recorded while researching the foundations of triathlon in Australia, considers the insights that might be gleaned from them in terms of the above oral history methodology. A Bond University approved ethics consent form was presented before each interview and the purpose of the interview explained. Interviewees were reminded that they were authorities on their own experiences and could determine what they wanted to put on record: the purpose was to allow them to define the narrative for themselves. Each interview started with one simple prompt: ‘What is your triathlon story?’ The resultant insights reveal a great deal not just about the athletes in question, but also the sport itself, and the function of oral traditions as networked social memory.

All three of the interviewees were active during the period in Australian triathlon history, when a national circuit emerged and talented athletes began to test themselves out against the best athletes in other countries, especially the United States. Sutherland Shire youth Michael Maroney watched the first Elouera Tri-Marathon in 1981 because he was considered too young to compete. Aged fifteen in 1982, Maroney participated in the second Tri-Marathon and loved it. A promising career culminated with a peak season over the Australian summer of 1989/90, including qualification for the Commonwealth Games Demonstration Triathlon in Auckland. At the end of the season, Maroney considered travelling to the United States with other semi-professional athletes. Instead he chose to remain in Australia, to continue his work as a swim coach, and to support his sister, marathon swimmer Susie Maroney.<sup>56</sup> More than a decade later, while serving as head coach for Triathlon New South Wales, Maroney competed as an age grouper in the 2009 ITU Triathlon World Championships and won his age group in the sprint and Aquathlon events. In 2012, he

became a Triathlon Australian board member and head of the Age Group Committee.<sup>57</sup>

The triathlon discourses with which Maroney engages in his oral testimony include the surf club inspired culture of the Sutherland Shire triathlon community, the emergence of a class of elite athletes in the late 1980s, the international adventures through which Australia's new professionals proved their individual and collective abilities, triathlon as an age group lifestyle sport, and Triathlon Australia as an embattled but maturing institution. The oral history narrative is clearly framed by awareness of the context of the interview, and an apparent self-consciousness about the need to connect with the many discourses that give Maroney's experiences meaning in triathlon memory. Maroney initially summarizes his athletic career, moving rapidly through the various stages before backtracking and working through key races in more detail. He only attempts to imbue one event with meaning: recalling that he 'recognized' that the Commonwealth Games Triathlon was 'a historical moment in the sport, a spring board for the Olympic campaign'. Maroney also alludes to a discourse referenced by other interviewees, asserting that 'the culture of the time', particularly in the Sutherland Shire, was all about 'racing hard and partying hard'.<sup>58</sup>

Within the narrative, Maroney seems to search for further opportunities to speak authoritatively about the triathlon pasts connected to his experience, before mentioning an incident that occurred in 1994. While on a training ride he was struck by a speeding car. Thrown into the air, he 'hit the ground', and was 'then run over by the car'. In a follow up sentence he names the cracked vertebrae and other injuries

that resulted from the accident in a matter-of-fact manner, that there was a compensation case, that he could barely move for three to four months, and that he eventually decided to train ‘and get fit again’. A few sentences later Maroney explains that he still enjoys training and competing, even if he is not at the same level as before. He responds briefly to a question about his recovery, and with that, moves on.

Maroney’s oral history narrative appears to lack composure. It is driven, apparently, by a desire to place on record everything that he could recall, and to avoid narrowing triathlon memory to a single discourse. He even comments that the narrative can be interpreted, ‘in your own way’. His reflections on potentially controversial matters and individuals all appear quite balanced and thoughtful. It seems that he is trying to present himself as a reliable witness to triathlon history, with the authority of having participated in many different aspects of the sport’s past. The cycling accident is presented differently. Complete within itself, the anecdotal nugget seems disconnected from the discourses that give meaning to the broader stories Maroney has to tell. By compressing the experience into a passing personal vignette, he both rescues it and renders it meaningless in terms of discourse about the sport. It disrupts his performance as authority on triathlon’s past in Australia. Another personal topic induces a second performative disruption, the ambiguous death of his 27 year old brother who fell from a balcony in Honolulu. Unable to neither compress it into a narrative nugget nor to connect it to triathlon discourse, Maroney lingers on the subject for a while, before lurching eventually into unrelated commentary about the state of triathlon in Australia.



Other oral histories also demonstrate lack of composure. Just as triathlon began to consolidate and professionalize in Australia, a Victorian youth, Stephen Foster, attracted attention. He secured podium finishes and wins at major triathlons while still a teenager, recognition as Triathlete of the Year and national champion multiple times, and a landmark victory at the 1988 Chicago Triathlon, which was touted to be the largest triathlon in the world at the time.<sup>59</sup> Foster's oral history narrative is quite different to that presented by Maroney. Foster sustains a fairly straightforward chronological structure, except where interviewer questions prompt a brief tangent. He readily resumes the chronological flow, and tells the story of each major achievement as if he is picturing and explaining a series of snapshots. In a polished recounting of the run at Chicago, Foster provides distance cues, before elaborating on feel or internal thought processes:

by about 3 or 4ks I was in fourth place. I could see Harold Robinson ahead and caught him. At the 5k mark I could see second place. I was thinking of the money. At 6ks I could see Pigg [the leader]. My eyeballs were popping out of my head and I was running in the red zone. At the 7k mark I caught up to Pigg, waited, then started attacking until I dropped him and won by 23 seconds.<sup>60</sup>

Foster's account of a serious cycling accident appears initially to follow the same internal structure. He provides a vivid image of a leg snapped in two, before describing what he recalls thinking and feeling. But there the narrative deviates into a second person reflection on the way that others reacted when he was no longer able to perform as an athlete. Foster returns to first person as he spells out the lessons that he learned, but uses the collective 'we' instead of the individual 'I'. Unintentionally apt, he concludes that we can 'switch it around', and look at the bad things as a chance to grow. The philosophical switch is as well rehearsed as the Chicago run leg anecdote, but the

shifting voice affirms a break in the narrative. Whether the threat of a narrative disruption arose from the interview scenario or not is unclear. The authority and skill attending the delivery of his personal accounts of success and trauma suggests that Foster had delivered similar performances before. In reality, the switch actually pre-empts what is to follow – a further rupture in the narrative. Foster leaps forward in time to his first full season in the United States, during which he failed to win any races, became very ill, ran out of money, and was personally responsible for a car accident in which one of his Australian peers suffered a serious neck injury. At that point Foster asks to speak off record, bringing the performance to a temporary halt, before resuming his narrative rhythm with an account of the 1990 Triathlon World Championships at Orlando, where he finished third and rounded out an Australian clean sweep of the podium.

For Foster, stories of racing success readily secure meaning in relation to triathlon memory about Australian dominance on the world stage at the very beginning of an international professional triathlon circuit. But injury, illness and guilt alternately threatened to prevent him from racing like a world class athlete. Foster recalls crying after the accident, not from the pain, but at the thought of ‘getting a nine to five office job’. A lack of composure, signalled by a switch in voice, occurs when Foster is recounting those moments in his story where the public discourse that gave meaning to his actions and choices – the narrative of the professional Australian athlete – could not give meaning to experience. Within those moments, the possibility of disappearing from triathlon memory seemed real. Foster may have presented similar narrative performances in the past, but in the context of the oral history, he steps briefly outside the narrative to critique the discourse to which it relates: ‘you find out who quietly shuts

the door and moves on'.<sup>61</sup> Whether or not Foster intended to speak with authority on the discourse, with this telling switch to second person he provides the means to rescue athletes who might otherwise be elided from triathlon memory because of their separation from discourses of national sporting significance.

Like Stephen Foster, the oral history narrative composed by Chippy Slater connects with the discourses of professionalization within Australia, and the early Australian struggles for international success. In many ways, Slater picks up where Foster is at his darkest, with the risk of being elided from triathlon memory because circumstances prevented him from performing at his athletic best, and hence from deriving meaning through the dominant narrative. Born Wayne Fraser, Slater begins his story not with triathlon but with his problematic family life, which appears to be partially instigated by his step mother and an alcoholic father. He recalls that he showed athletic promise at school, but had little opportunity to develop as he was moved to a school without a strong sports program. After school, Slater joined the Surf Lifesaving Club at Bondi and performed well in some high profile swim-run events that were promoted inaccurately as 'biathlons' in the mid-1980s. He recalls a swim leg across Sydney Harbour in 1987, with 'all the helicopters buzzing about. That's how I knew it was a big event'. Competing in his first triathlon in the same year Slater discovered both his potential – he finished second outright – and his problem. Triathlon was expensive. Aged eighteen, he received limited family assistance for the costs of the sport or the costs of living in general. His father bought him a bike, but Slater had to support himself. Slater's podium finish elicited an invitation to join the sponsored Barracuda Team, but it was not sustainable and other competitors and the team coach urged Slater to take up an apprenticeship. He did, but

he was ‘always being pushed out of home’ and ‘sleeping in parks’. His girlfriend’s family took Slater in, but he still needed to cover the costs of travel to triathlons. The surf club held a fundraising night when he qualified for the Commonwealth Games Triathlon.<sup>62</sup>

When Slater reaches this period of considerable stress and frustration in his story, the narrative begins to rupture. He pauses and steps outside the narrative: ‘My memories are very blocked – they’re in chunks. Nothing’s in a smooth ... I think I’ve blocked some things out’.<sup>63</sup> Although he resumes the elements of his narrative that connect to discourse about Australian professionalization and international success, briefly recounting his experience of the 1990 Commonwealth Games triathlon, Slater’s contribution to a dominant theme in triathlon memory is half hearted. Instead, he begins to critique the original discourse about Australia’s world class athletes, crafted by mainstream and triathlon media, by Triathlon Australia and by accumulated layers of oral narratives over time. The prize money, the sponsorships, and subsequently opportunities for funding offered by Triathlon Australia, all remained elusive for Slater. He had to win a high profile event to secure a sustainable sponsorship, but for that he needed to be able to train and rest and eat as well: ‘You need support to win. You need to be able to get support, then pay them back when you make it’.<sup>64</sup> Slater’s alienation from the discourse manifests as a lack of composure.

Following this lengthy rupture, Slater returns once again to the two discourses that give meaning to his experience. Through considerable adversity he managed to persist with a semi-professional career, and lived and raced in Europe from 1993. While self-consciously trying to offer insights into the personalities of other high profile athletes,

Slater pauses again. A narrative about a press conference with a fellow athlete in 1999, who had supportive sponsors and family, preceded the pause. Slater spoke again:

It's like a dream. You've got your hand up; screaming, falling, and no one is hearing. I've been both the stronger person and the underdog. We want to see the underdog win, but the strong person, they don't think he needs help.<sup>65</sup>

Slater brings this abrupt and powerful break in the narrative to a resolution:

As I said to my girl the other night – I don't know what to say. She said, 'Say it's great'. But because it's not. I can't. What my girl said was, 'You know what? You're triathlon. Triathlon is in you. You didn't do it for triathlon'. I'm still here, loving triathlons as I did when I first begun. You can never take it out of me.<sup>66</sup>

Potentially, the most meaningful part of the oral history is this disruption to Slater's interview performance as authority on the struggle of the talented athlete for professional success. Through it, Slater reveals the limitations of narratives of athletic performance that place significance on Australian recognition abroad. Not only does he point to the absence of economic realism in narratives of international significance, he also poses a contrasting narrative that frames triathlon in terms of personal significance. This alternative perspective is quickly banished from the narrative. Like Maroney and Foster, Slater, in his assumed role as authority on triathlon memory, chooses to affirm a specific view of the sport that does not remember the experiences of triathletes beyond the professional elite.

### **Oral Narratives, Triathlon Memory, and the Dual Pursuit of Individual and Collective Meaning**

This paper makes a case for recognition of the role of oral traditions in the framing of triathlon memory. It is impossible to recover and analyse the oral narratives of the past that constituted triathlon memory, but it is still possible, through oral history, to discern the traces of those traditions and to glean the meanings embedded in that memory, as well as its problems. Gary Osmond argues that ‘even minor commemorations serve to “save history”, which is not so much to preserve events as to draw them into individual and collective focus’.<sup>67</sup> The oral histories cited in this paper provide clues as to the many small oral acts of remembering and forgetting on which triathlon memory appears to rest.

The testimonies provided by Michael Maroney, Stephen Foster and Chippy Slater demonstrate not just the role that oral histories play as acts of social memory, but also the value of an approach that treats oral histories as performances in which interviewees attempt to connect their experiences to past and present discourse. All three interviewees seek both to speak as authorities on aspects of triathlon history, and to attach meaning to their experiences using discourse formulated in the past, in order to secure a place for themselves and their experiences in social memory. In each case, the inability to connect experience seamlessly with dominant discourses surrounding the notion of the professional Australian triathlete as the ultimately successful underdog on the world stage, leads to narrative rupture. Far from failing in their efforts to authoritatively remember the past, the disrupted narratives produced by Maroney, Foster and Slater unintentionally expose the limitations of the discourse informing acts of social memory such as Hall of Fame nominations. They reveal a tendency in triathlon memory to forget those who are not part of the sporting elite,

who do not have obvious national meaning; athletes for whom triathlon is an everyday experience, in many instances a prohibitively costly one.

Yet, as post-subcultural theorists suggest when advocating analysis of niche media, the oral narratives cited in this paper do not provide evidence of subcultural resistance. The interviewees both uphold dominant discourse and re-frame discourse – directly through critique and indirectly through unplanned narrative rupture. Crafted in spontaneous personal performances, the accounts produced by Maroney, Foster and Slater thus counter the possibility that oral acts of triathlon memory represent Gramscian forms of collective resistance. In the absence of a coherent critique, the three narratives demonstrate that triathlon oral traditions result from complex, nuanced and spontaneous performances, and affirm that oral acts of social memory are both individually and collectively meaningful.

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<sup>1</sup> Emily Coates, Ben Clayton and Barbara Humberstone, 'A Battle for Control: Exchanges of Power in the Subculture of Snowboarding', *Sport in Society* 13, no. 7/8 (2010): 1084.

<sup>2</sup> Coates, Clayton, and Humberstone, 'A Battle for Control', 1083.

<sup>3</sup> Belinda Wheaton, 'After Sport Culture: Rethinking Sport and Post-Subcultural Theory', *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 31, no.3 (2007): 293; and Belinda Wheaton and Becky Beal, "'Keeping It Real": Subcultural Media and the Discourses of Authenticity in Alternative Sport', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 38, no. 2 (2003): 156-8.

<sup>4</sup> Wheaton and Beal, 'Keeping It Real', 158.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas Booth, 'Escaping the Past? The Cultural Turn and Language in Sport History', *Rethinking History* 8, no. 1 (2004): 113, 105-6, 110.

<sup>6</sup> Murray Phillips, 'Remembering Sport History: Narrative, Social Memory and the Origins of the Rugby League in Australia', *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 21, no. 1 (2004): 54.

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- <sup>7</sup> Gary Osmond, “‘Modest Monuments’?: Postage Stamps, Duke Kahanamoku and Hierarchies of Social Memory’, *The Journal of Pacific History* 43, no. 3 (2008): 315.
- <sup>8</sup> Fiona Skillen and Carol Osborne, ‘It’s Good to Talk: Oral History, Sports History and Heritage’, *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 32, no. 15 (2015): 1884.
- <sup>9</sup> Osmond, ‘Modest Monuments’, 327.
- <sup>10</sup> Scott Tinley, *Triathlon: A Personal History* (Boulder, Co.: Velo Press, 1998), 11; and Jane E. Hunt, *Multisport Dreaming: The Foundations of Triathlon in Australia* (Gold Coast: Write Press, 2014), 5-6.
- <sup>11</sup> Mike Plant, *Iron Will: The Heart and Soul of the Triathlon’s Ultimate Challenge* ([Chicago]: Contemporary Books, 1987), 52-66.
- <sup>12</sup> Barry McDermott, ‘Ironman’, *Sports Illustrated*, May 14, 1979, <https://www.si.com/vault/1979/05/14/823621/ironman-to-earn-that-title-tom-warren-victoriously-swam-24-miles-through-rough-seas-bicycled-112-miles-and-ran-a-marathon-all-in-a-single-day-of-agonny> (accessed September 14, 2018); and ABC Sport, ‘Julie Moss Competing in the 1982 Hawaii Ironman Triathlon’, Uploaded by Gonzalo de Abreu to Youtube, March 29, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VbWsQMabczM> (accessed 25 July 2017).
- <sup>13</sup> Tinley, *Triathlon*, 75; and Douglas Robinson, ‘WTC and the Term Ironman’, *slowtwitch.com*, [http://www.slowtwitch.com/Features/WTC\\_and\\_the\\_term\\_Ironman\\_1954.html](http://www.slowtwitch.com/Features/WTC_and_the_term_Ironman_1954.html) (accessed May 22, 2017). In order to avoid anachronistic application of Ironman branding requirements, Ironman as a term is used as an adjective, except when it is used with reference to the Hawaiian event in the early to mid 1980s, and in vernacular tradition, because historically the term was used as a noun.
- <sup>14</sup> Kevin Helliker, ‘Ironman To Be Acquired by China’s Dalian Wanda’, *The Wall Street Journal*, August 27, 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/ironman-to-be-acquired-by-chinas-dalian-wanda-1440642571> (accessed May 19, 2017).
- <sup>15</sup> International Triathlon Union, ‘About’, <http://www.triathlon.org/about> (accessed August 3, 2019).
- <sup>16</sup> Hunt, *Multisport Dreaming*.
- <sup>17</sup> Sally Edwards, *Triathlon: A Triple Fitness Sport* (Sacramento, CA.: Fleet Feet Press, 1982), 15, 19; Fiona Kennedy, ‘Sport of the Eighties’, *Fun runner*, April/May 1988; ‘The Road Ahead’, *Cycling Australia*, November 1983, 19; and Roberta H. Smith, ‘What is a Triathlon?’, *World Wildlife Fund 1983 Centaurian Triathlon*, souvenir program 7, 1983 (Bill Bell Collection, United States of America Triathlon Archives, Colorado Springs).



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- <sup>18</sup> Aleck Hunter and Erik Kirschbaum, *Swim + Bike + Run: Triathlon – the Sporting Trinity* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1985), 7-14, 5.
- <sup>19</sup> Ashley Laurretta, 'A Look At 30 Years Of Competitor With Founder Bob Babbitt', *Competitor* June 1, 2017, [https://www.podiumrunner.com/look-30-years-competitor-founder-bob-babbitt\\_164711](https://www.podiumrunner.com/look-30-years-competitor-founder-bob-babbitt_164711) (accessed June 6, 2019).
- <sup>20</sup> Bob Babbitt, interview with the author, San Diego, CA., April 2019, notes in possession of the author; and Bob Babbitt, *30 Years of the Ironman Triathlon World Championship* (Maidenhead, UK: Meyer & Meyer Sport (UK) Ltd, 2008), 17.
- <sup>21</sup> Chris Foster, 'Meet a Tri Legend: Mike Plant', *triathlete* (magazine titled not capitalized), August 9, 2018, [https://www.triathlete.com/2018/08/lifestyle/meet-a-tri-legend-mike-plant\\_332935](https://www.triathlete.com/2018/08/lifestyle/meet-a-tri-legend-mike-plant_332935) (accessed September 12, 2018); and Plant, *Iron Will*, 52-66.
- <sup>22</sup> Tinley, *Triathlon*.
- <sup>23</sup> Jim Lampley, 'Foreword', in Bob Babbitt, *30 Years of the Ironman Triathlon World Championship* (Maidenhead, UK: Meyer & Meyer Sport (UK) Ltd., 2008), 8-9; International Triathlon Union, 'About,' <http://www.triathlon.org/about>; and Nicola Hargreaves, 'San Diego – The Birthplace of Triathlon', May 9, 2012, [https://www.triathlon.org/news/article/san\\_diego\\_-\\_the\\_birthplace\\_of\\_triathlon](https://www.triathlon.org/news/article/san_diego_-_the_birthplace_of_triathlon) (accessed August 20, 2019).
- <sup>24</sup> USA Triathlon, Board of Director Minutes, <https://www.teamusa.org/USA-Triathlon/About/USAT/Board-of-Directors/Board-of-Directors-Minutes> (accessed August 20, 2019).
- <sup>25</sup> Osmond, 'Modest Monuments' 315, 327.
- <sup>26</sup> Cutting with no author, no title, no date (hand-written date of 1996) (Greg Reddan private collection, Gold Coast, Australia); 'Generally Speaking', *Nissan Australian Triathlon Championships 1984* souvenir programme, 1984 (Ramon Russell private collection, Mornington Peninsula, Australia); Kennedy, 'Sport of the Eighties'; and 'The Road Ahead', *Cycling Australia*, November 1983 (Greg Reddan private collection, Gold Coast, Australia).
- <sup>27</sup> Alun Munslow, 'Authority and Reality in the Representation of the Past', *Rethinking History* 1, no. 1 (1997): 85.
- <sup>28</sup> Wheaton and Beal, 'Keeping It Real', 158.

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<sup>29</sup> Cutting with no author, no title, (1996); 'Generally Speaking', *Nissan Australian Triathlon Championships 1984* souvenir programme; Kennedy, 'Sport of the Eighties'; and 'The Road Ahead', *Cycling Australia*.

<sup>30</sup> Neil Robinson, interview with the author, August 3, 2011, notes in possession of the author; John Maloney, email to the author, September 27, 2010, notes in possession of the author; and Gerard Donnelly, interview with the author, February 19, 2012, notes in possession of the author.

<sup>31</sup> Geoff Frost, interview with the author, May 23, 2012, notes in possession of the author.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Stone, interview with the author, November 12, 2011, notes in possession of the author.

<sup>33</sup> Ian Toll, interview with the author, July 26, 2012, notes in possession of the author; Ross Pyett, interview with the author, August 3, 2011, notes in possession of the author; and Tony Southwell, interview with the author, October 4, 2011, notes in possession of the author.

<sup>34</sup> Pyett, interview; and Toll, interview.

<sup>35</sup> Marie Williams, 'Sri Chinmoy Triathlon, March 22', *Fun Runner*, May 1981, 45; and Robyn Brown, interview with the author, August 30, 2011, notes in possession of the author.

<sup>36</sup> Mark Anderson, interview with the author, May 11, 2012, notes in possession of the author; and John Hickey, interview with the author, May 23, 2012, notes in possession of the author.

<sup>37</sup> Marc Dragan, interview with the author, April 21, 2012, notes in possession of the author.

<sup>38</sup> Greg Reddan, interview with the author, August 31, 2010, notes in possession of the author; and Greg Reddan, 'Triathlon News', *Cycling Australia* September 1984, 12.

<sup>39</sup> Marc Cera, interview with the author, July 24, 2012, notes in possession of the author.

<sup>40</sup> Southwell, interview.

<sup>41</sup> Pyett, interview.

<sup>42</sup> Mark Batten, interview with the author, August 31, 2011, notes in possession of the author; and John Barker, interview with the author, February 18, 2012, notes in possession of the author.

<sup>43</sup> As numerous scholars have noted, much can be learned from the oral testimonies of women. This is certainly true for triathlon. The oral histories of women involved in triathlon warrant careful analysis and are the subject of a separate, extensive study. See Penny Summerfield, 'Culture and Composure: Creating Narratives of the Gendered Self in Oral History Interviews', *Cultural and Social History* vol. 1, no. 1 (2004), 65-93; and Skillen & Osborne, 'It's Good To Talk', 1889-91.

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- <sup>44</sup> Gary Osmond, 'Forgetting Charlie and Tums Cavill: Social Memory and Australian Swimming History', *Journal of Australian Studies* 33, no. 1 (2009): 94.
- <sup>45</sup> Paul Connerton, 'Seven Types of Forgetting', *Memory Studies* 1, no. 1 (2008): 63-4.
- <sup>46</sup> Murray G. Phillips, 'A Historian in the Museum: Story Spaces and Australia's Sporting Past', *Australian Historical Studies* 41, no. 3 (2010): 407.
- <sup>47</sup> Connerton, 'Seven Types of Forgetting', 63.
- <sup>48</sup> Mahua Sarkar, 'Between Craft and Method: Meaning and Inter-subjectivity in Oral History Analysis', *Journal of Historical Sociology* 25, no. 4 (2012): 584, 586.
- <sup>49</sup> Summerfield, 'Culture and Composure', 68-9, 89, 92-3.
- <sup>50</sup> Summerfield, 'Culture and Composure', 92-3.
- <sup>51</sup> Sarkar, 'Between Craft and Method', 593; and Alessandro Portelli, 'Living Voices: The Oral History Interview as Dialogue and Experience', *The Oral History Review* 45, no. 2 (2018): 247.
- <sup>52</sup> Portelli, 'Living Voices', 246.
- <sup>53</sup> Penny Summerfield, 'Introduction', *Histories of the Self: Personal Narratives and Historical Practice*, ed. Penny Summerfield (Abington, UK: Routledge, 2019), 12.
- <sup>54</sup> Katie Barclay and Sarah Richardson, 'Introduction: Performing the Self: Women's Lives in Historical Perspective', *Women's History Review* 22, no. 2 (2013): 180; and Summerfield, 'Introduction'.
- <sup>55</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), 12, 243, 252.
- <sup>56</sup> Michael Maroney, interview with the author, August 3, 2011, notes in possession of the author.
- <sup>57</sup> Triathlon Australia, '2017 Legends', [http://www.triathlon.org.au/About/Celebration\\_of\\_Champions/Legend\\_of\\_the\\_Sport\\_Award/2017\\_Legends.htm](http://www.triathlon.org.au/About/Celebration_of_Champions/Legend_of_the_Sport_Award/2017_Legends.htm) (accessed June 5, 2019).
- <sup>58</sup> Maroney, interview.
- <sup>59</sup> Triathlon Australia, "'Little Old" Stephen Foster Stands Tall in the Hall', March 10, 2017, [http://www.triathlon.org.au/About/Latest\\_News/\\_LITTLE\\_OLD\\_\\_STEPHEN\\_FOSTER\\_STANDS\\_TALL\\_IN\\_THE\\_HALL.htm](http://www.triathlon.org.au/About/Latest_News/_LITTLE_OLD__STEPHEN_FOSTER_STANDS_TALL_IN_THE_HALL.htm) (accessed June 5, 2019).
- <sup>60</sup> Stephen Foster, interview with the author, August 16, 2011, notes in possession of the author.
- <sup>61</sup> Foster, interview.

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<sup>62</sup> Chip Van Halen, interview with the author, September 5, 2012, notes in possession of the author.

Slater changed his name a number of times from Wayne Fraser to Chippy Slater and eventually to Van Halen. Slater is used in text, as this is the name used during the period of time under discussion.

<sup>63</sup> Van Halen, interview.

<sup>64</sup> Van Halen, interview.

<sup>65</sup> Van Halen, interview.

<sup>66</sup> Van Halen, interview.

<sup>67</sup> Osmond, 'Modest Monuments', 328.